

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 9-A

WASHINGTON TIMES
10 April 1986

Captured Sandinista describes battle

By Roger Fontaine
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

A Sandinista soldier captured by the Honduran army said he was only told by his superiors that everyone was going "over there" to capture camps belonging to the Nicaraguan rebels in last month's border incursion.

U.S. officials now say the operation may have involved as many as 2,000 Sandinista troops.

The soldier, Jose Salomon Antonio Mayorga, was interviewed by a Radio Marti correspondent in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. A copy of the interview, the first of its kind, was obtained by The Washington Times yesterday.

U.S. officials contacted by The Times were not aware of the interview and could not confirm its authenticity, but other sources indicated the interview took place late last week.

The five-minute interview detailed one draftee's account of the Nicaraguan incursion into Honduras which led to a series of clashes between rebel and government forces.

Mr. Mayorga claimed he left Nicaragua March 3 with his unit as part of the Francisco Estrada counterinsurgency battalion, one of the elite formations the Nicaraguan government sent into Honduras to capture and destroy major rebel facilities.

Earlier, the Honduran army displayed in a press conference two other Sandinista prisoners — also members of the Estrada battalion — but the soldiers, Carlos Alberto Sandino and Mario Salomon Hernandez, were not allowed to answer questions by reporters.

The Honduran government, which has refused to acknowledge the presence of Nicaraguan rebels on its soil, has also discouraged attempts to interview Nicaraguan prisoners of war.

U.S. officials now believe that at least seven Sandinista soldiers were captured during the Easter raid.

Mr. Mayorga said he carried a "Russian AK [assault rifle]" and that approximately 1,000 Sandinista "effectives" were sent into the battle.

The captured Sandinista soldier said that he and one other member of his eight-man unit were captured by the Honduran army. He gave no other details, but U.S. officials told The Times that he was probably one of the stragglers picked up after the battalion was broken up by fierce resistance from the Nicaraguan rebels.

"They didn't tell us anything," Mr. Mayorga said. "They simply told us, 'Let's get going over there because there are some camps belonging to the FDN.'"

Only under prompting from his interviewer did the captured Sandinista soldier indicate that "there" happened to be Honduras.

The FDN — the Nicaraguan Democratic Force — is the largest armed group battling the Soviet-supported regime in Managua, and is seeking \$100 million in U.S. aid pending a House decision next week.

Mr. Mayorga said that the Sandinista government's policy toward the resistance and Honduras was "absurd" and "totally incorrect." He said there should be negotiations in order to reach agreement between all sides in the Nicaraguan conflict.

He also charged that Nicaraguan youth were being recruited by force into the Sandinista army. "One can't work or do anything without [military] service," he said.

But when they are drafted, he added, "they take to the hills" at the first opportunity.

U.S. officials now estimate that between 1,500 and 2,000 Nicaraguan troops crossed into Honduras at three separate locations in order to wipe out principal FDN military fa-

cilities, including an airstrip and a training camp.

They were stopped by a nearly equal number of Contras — with two battalions trapping an elite Sandinista military unit 18 miles inside the border at the site of the rebels' principal training camp near Yamales, the Centro de Instruccion Militar.

U.S. officials conservatively estimate that 100 Sandinistas were killed in the operation.

After being defeated by the rebel forces, the Sandinista units, according to U.S. intelligence sources, were forced to retreat in small groups across the border while Honduran troops were ferried into the area by U.S. helicopters to mop up the remaining Sandinistas trapped inside Honduran territory.